

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 623

JC 870 353

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TITLE Job Clubs Hit the Mark for Students with Disabilities.
PUB DATE Sep 87
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Career Counseling; Career Planning; Community Colleges; *Developmental Disabilities; *Disabilities; Employment Counselors; Employment Interviews; Employment Opportunities; *Employment Problems; *Job Placement; *Job Search Methods; Program Descriptions; Self Esteem; Two Year Colleges; Two Year College Students

IDENTIFIERS *Job Clubs

ABSTRACT

Chicago Citywide Colleges (CCC), Columbus (Ohio) Technical Institute (CTI), and the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) recently participated in a model job club project operated by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education. The project sought to demonstrate the utility of job clubs in helping students with disabilities make the transition from college to work. Based on general guidelines provided at orientation, coordinators from the three institutions developed their own club structure and strategies. The program at CCRI, which involved 23 students, included role playing, guest speakers, workshops, video feedback, and individualized counseling. The activities focused on employer expectations, use of want ads, telephone and interview skills, resume and application development, and job-related vocabulary. At CTI, 25 students participated in the program, which emphasized student job placement and job-seeking skills. While the programs at CCRI and CTI ran for 12 weeks, at CCC, 26 participants attended two separate club sessions held for 8 weeks each. At CCC, the job club focused specifically on students with developmental disabilities, emphasizing problems of motivation, self-esteem, and self-expression. The job club projects were evaluated through a pre-/post-assessment of members, which revealed a significant improvement in self-reported job-seeking skills; and data collected on the job status of members within two months of completing the program. (PAA)

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ED284623

JOB CLUBS HIT THE MARK
FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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September 1987

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Angel is 25 and is just finishing her associate degree in computer programming. She has a resume and she's filled out job applications. She's even been on an interview or two. But employers just don't seem to be interested in her skills. Not because they don't need those skills. Not necessarily even because Angel is hearing-impaired. Mostly, it's because Angel doesn't know nearly as much about successful job hunting as she thinks she does.

Angel's problem is common among community college students with disabilities, according to the directors of offices of disabled student services at Chicago Citywide Colleges, Columbus (Ohio) Technical Institute, and the Community College of Rhode Island. These 2-year colleges recently participated in a project operated by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education to demonstrate the utility of job clubs in helping students with disabilities make the transition from college to work.¹

The National Center contracted with three member institutions of the National Postsecondary Alliance to serve as demonstration sites for a proposed model job club for students with disabilities. The job club coordinators at the three demonstration sites found that most students with disabilities substantially overestimate their job search skills and world-of-work savvy.

¹The project final report, Using Job Clubs to Assist in the Transition to Work of Postsecondary Students with Disabilities (ED 273 750), is available through ERIC.

Students think they know how to fill out job applications, but most cannot do so adequately. They think they have good resumes, but few have a grasp of desirable content and format. They feel they can give a good interview, but most have unsatisfactory presentation skills and do not dress appropriately. Many do not know how to discuss their disability and necessary accommodations with employers. And quite a few are not sure that they can go to work without losing Social Security or other difficult-to-replace medical benefits.

A job club is "the activity of an individual as part of a group of fellow job seekers, working together under the instruction and encouragement of a leader who provides support, information, facilities, and supplies" (Azrin and Besalel 1980, pp. 1-2). An effective job club not only helps members find good jobs, it also helps them develop the ability to conduct a successful job search in the future, without the aid of a job club.

The job club approach has proven to be an effective way of helping people -- even people faced with unusual barriers, such as people on Welfare, laid-off steelworkers and miners, and displaced homemakers -- find worthwhile employment. What is more, Azrin and Philip (1979) found that job clubs work for persons with disabilities. And Brolin and Elliott (1984) determined that community colleges are good sites for providing people with disabilities with transitional services for employment. But no one had apparently attempted to apply the job club concept

systematically in a 2-year college setting to serve these students.

Although the National Center's federally funded demonstration project was not intended to be a rigorous research project, it tried out the job club concept at three 2-year colleges in order to (1) determine job clubs' general applicability to students with disabilities and (2) discover what works and does not work in this setting for this population.

Following general job club guidelines set by the National Center at an orientation meeting, the coordinators at each site developed their own, unique job club structure and strategies. Two of the job clubs served students with a diverse array of disabilities. Most students were completing or had recently completed an associate degree or 1-year certificate program. In Chicago, the job club specifically served students with developmental disabilities. These students were completing or had completed a special 4-month cooperative training program to give them job skills.

At the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI), 23 students were involved in the 12-week program. Members included both students who were about to graduate from CCRI and students who were not graduating in 1986. Employment goals included full-time permanent jobs, temporary, summer, part-time, volunteer, co-op and internship, and work-study jobs.

CCRI's job club developed members' job readiness skills and assisted the members in initiating and completing individual job searches. Activities focused on employer expectations, the role

of the employee, use of want ads and other job opportunity resources, telephone and interview skills, resume writing and filling out job applications, job-related vocabulary, and relevant legal issues. Activities included guest speakers, mock interviews, use of a specialized commercial videotape, handouts, workshops, and individualized counseling, among others. Members had opportunities to speak to other persons with disabilities who were successfully employed.

At CCRI, members' mock interviews were videotaped to enable the participants to see and evaluate their own and others' interview skills. Several members also taped personal employment requests that appeared on the "Job Hunt" segment of a local television news program. Members attended both a general college job fair and a "Job Fair for the Handi-Capable," sponsored by a local Partners in Progress organization. Another unique feature of CCRI's job club provided members with training in the use of the college's Automatic Career Services computer system containing daily updates of job openings on file with CCRI's Job Placement Office. Job club members also produced, as a group project, a booklet entitled Transition to Employment: A Guide for the Disabled Job Seeker (Community College of Rhode Island 1986).

At Columbus Technical Institute (CTI), 25 students attended the weekly job club sessions of the 12-week program. Employment goals focused solely on placement in full-time permanent positions for graduating students or recent graduates. To get around scheduling difficulties, the job club was split into two groups,

one that met weekly in the afternoons and one that met weekly in the evenings.

CTI job club activities focused on employer expectations, community services relevant to employment for persons with disabilities, resume writing and filling out job applications, organizing the job search, use of want ads and other job opportunity resources, relevant legal issues, learning how to dress for interviews and work, and so forth. Speakers included employers, personnel officers, and graduates of CTI who had disabilities and were successfully employed. Mock interviews were held on a one-to-one basis with a job club coordinator and were not videotaped. Use of rap sessions and individual counseling sessions was intensive.

CTI's job club had several unique features. The coordination responsibilities were shared by two part-time coordinators. One coordinator focused on working with local employers for job development and placement. The other coordinator focused mainly on helping the job club members develop and refine their employment goals and job-seeking savvy and skills. Both coordinators attended all job club sessions and worked closely with each other and with the participants.

Recruitment for CTI's job club used a "kick-off" dinner to introduce potential members to the job club concept, activities, and staff. Several times throughout the job club program, the college hosted a catered dinner for the afternoon and evening job club groups to encourage an exchange of ideas and experience. Speakers to the job clubs could not always attend both afternoon

and evening meetings, so CTI videotaped the speeches for playback to the other group.

At City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), 26 participants attended two job clubs. One job club ran from March through April, and the other ran from May through June, each for 8 weeks. The clubs met three times a week for a total of 6 hours a week. Most of the participants had developmental disabilities and were also economically and educationally disadvantaged. Therefore, the job club employment goals aimed specifically at full-time permanent jobs, because part-time jobs or seasonal work seldom have fringe benefits, long-term job security, or career advancement opportunities.

Activities in CCC's job clubs included the use of want ads and the Yellow Pages to locate job opportunities, a slide-tape to model interviewing skills, speakers, preparation of resumes (including a "pocket crib sheet" to take to interviews), discussion of employer expectations, completion of job applications, learning how to dress for interviews and for work, and the like. The second job club used videotaping of mock interviews to aid members in improving their presentation skills. Extensive individualized counseling was given to students who needed extra help.

CCC's job club was significantly different from CTI's or CCRI's, largely because of the developmental disabilities and disadvantaged status of its members. These posed special problems related to motivation, self-esteem, independent decision making, self-expression, and a grasp of the requirements of the work

world. Also, a number of the members lacked sufficient finances to pay for transportation to the job club sessions or to job interviews.

To counter these problems, CCC's job club coordinator deliberately modeled a work-world atmosphere in the meetings. She enforced attendance and tardiness regulations and continually emphasized an "I can" attitude among the members. She also provided or arranged for substantial individual counseling and assistance, where needed. A part-time aide was hired to assist the coordinator with the meetings and with necessary paperwork. The coordinator or other staff accompanied members to job sites, when necessary, to assist them in filling out job applications -- another area of special difficulty for students with developmental disabilities. The CCC job club also emphasized community survival skills in addition to job-seeking and job-keeping skills. Finally, the coordinator found additional funds to provide transportation costs for members who could otherwise not attend meetings or travel to job interviews.

Each of the demonstration sites modified the proposed model program to fit the job club concept to the needs of its students with disabilities and the resources of the college. Though all three sites had somewhat different approaches, some common findings emerged on which elements of the basic job club concept did or did not seem to work for community college students with disabilities. The following observations are based on site reports and project staff analyses:

- o Colleges that offer a job club for students with disabilities have to be willing to "go the extra mile" necessary to meet the special challenges of their job club -- challenges that are probably not part of job clubs for other populations. A job club of this kind will inevitably require extra commitment in terms of time, funding, and patience. It cannot be operated by a regular staff person in his or her "spare time."
- o A job club advisory committee should determine from the beginning whether the club will focus specifically on helping members who want full-time, permanent paid jobs, or whether it will also assist those who want part-time, summer, volunteer, work-study, or other kinds of jobs. This decision will affect what students will be recruited, when in the school year the job club will operate, what linkages will be made with internal and external organizations to assist in placement, and so forth.
- o Special attention and resources should be devoted to providing job placement assistance to the members. As all three demonstration sites learned, many employers are reluctant to interview and hire persons with disabilities, so the members will need much more help with placement than would members of other job clubs. Each of the demonstration sites had different approaches to providing this extra placement aid, and other approaches remain to be invented.
- o Early job club meetings should focus on helping members unlearn erroneous attitudes and misinformation about the work world and their own ability to get and keep a good job. Students with disabilities often need to build up their self-esteem and self-confidence before they can put much energy into their job search. An especially effective strategy for achieving this is to bring in peer speakers -- persons with disabilities (especially graduates of the college) who are successfully and happily employed.
- o Phone banks are standard in many job clubs, but in a 2-year college setting, administrative concerns about supervision of phone use and the costs of extra phone jacks are realities with which the job club must deal. All three demonstration sites found that access to the coordinator's phone or to a phone in the office of disabled student services met the members' needs.
- o The job club developers should plan enough time into the schedule to enable the training to focus not only on developing job-seeking skills, but also on developing job-keeping skills and attitudes (e.g., work ethics, professional comportment, being on time, not missing work unnecessarily, staying on task, and the like).

All three job club sites administered a special pre/post assessment instrument to members at the beginning and end of the job clubs. These assessment scores show significant improvements in the members' self-reported job-seeking skills and world-of-work savvy at completion of the job club activities. The coordinators felt that students overestimated their skills and knowledge on the pre-assessment; that is, like the fictitious "Angel" at the beginning of this article, they "didn't know what they didn't know." But these overestimations only imply that they probably learned even more during their job club experiences than the instrument measured.

Each of the job club sites also kept close track of the number of members who achieved their employment goals. Data were collected within a brief period of about 2 months following the termination of the job clubs. (But even before the job clubs ended, some members were getting jobs!)

At CTI and CCRI, both of which served students with an array of disabilities, more job club members got work than their peers (students with disabilities) who were also seeking work but did not participate in a job club. At CTI, job club members found better full-time permanent jobs, quicker, than their peers, and the placements had a higher employment level and higher salaries. At CCRI, the jobs obtained (even summer work) were better jobs than students would normally obtain without job club assistance. CCRI job club staff believe that these seasonal working experiences, combined with the job club activities, will greatly

improve the job club veterans' likelihood of finding good-paying, full-time permanent employment when they graduate.

At CCC, only about a third of the job club participants with developmental disabilities found employment within 2 months of the club's end. An additional two members learned, through their job club experiences, that they wanted to seek further training before trying to enter the job market. Most of the jobs obtained through the job club, however, were for permanent employment with good benefits -- major emphases for CCC's job club, where a goal was work that would get the members into independent living circumstances, most for the first time in their lives.

Here, then, are the major advantages of a job club for community college students with disabilities:

- o A job club can help members find better jobs (with higher salaries and better benefits) than they would find if they conducted their job search without the support and information available through the club. It often keeps members from lowering their standards for taking jobs. Job clubs also help members find these jobs faster than they would normally.
- o In a job club, students with disabilities get to see that others like them are succeeding in the work world, and they have the opportunity to find out what their peers go through while "pounding the pavement" for a job.
- o A job club provides the group support, feedback, and encouragement that members need to persevere in their job search, especially after they meet with initial disappointment. Members can vent their frustrations and help motivate each other. When a member does get a job, this revitalizes the others' interest and determination.
- o The job club experience can help persons with disabilities develop a broader sense of kinship with their peers, even though they may come into the job club with biases and ignorance about people with disabilities other than their own.
- o A job club teaches members job-seeking skills and strategies than not only enable them to find jobs now,

while they have the club's support, but also to conduct successful job searches when they need to do so in the future.

- o A job club can help some students realize that they are not ready to pursue a job, yet. It can also help some students realize that they should find part-time, summer, or volunteer work in order to build up a good resume of work experiences before looking for a full-time, permanent paid job.

Benefits also accrue to 2-year colleges that provide job clubs for their students with disabilities. Here are some of them, as reported by the demonstration job club sites:

- o A job club for students with disabilities is a practical vehicle for serving this hard-to-place student population. The job club can free an office of disabled student services from the responsibility of providing specialized placement services, workshops, and so forth.
- o A job club is an effective way for an office of disabled student services to build up networks it does not have. This is particularly true in the case of establishing good communications and working relationships with local business and industry. Good public relations with the community also result.
- o A job club can incidentally function as a recruitment medium for the college. By increasing the number, quality, and speed of placements for graduates with disabilities, the college can develop an excellent reputation for service to this population. Employed graduates with improved self-esteem, hygiene, and presentation skills can also boost the college's reputation. In addition, job club staff who work closely with employers may pique the employers' interest in other services the college offers, resulting in, for instance, employers sending workers (disabled and otherwise) back to the college for more training.

Though further, rigorous research is needed to confirm the findings of this demonstration project, job clubs for students with disabilities appear to be a practical and effective solution to transition problems of these community college students.

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